

for the realization by God's own power of this hope, and he will continually implore the Blessed Mother (as the Catholics of England do every Sunday) to 'intercede for our separated brethren, that with us in the one true fold they may be united to the chief Shepherd, the vicar of her Son'.



THE CONVERT'S WORK FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

MICHAEL RICHARDS

MANY of those who come to the Church after some years of the faithful service of God in one of the separated Churches express the hope that they will be able, from their knowledge and experience, to make a particular contribution to the re-union of Christendom. Since they know both the Church and one or other of the separated bodies more or less closely related to it, from the inside, they hope that they will be able to help forward the day of reconciliation between the two. How far are such hopes justified? Many of us know people who have had expectations such as these and who have been disappointed; and there are indeed some converts, well-known in the Church, who do not appear to have been able to work for the return of their former brethren in the way others, perhaps, imagined they would be able to do. Does being a convert necessarily imply usefulness in this field? And can the Church be expected to encourage such converts to work in any particular way, so that their previous experience may not be lost?

The answer to these questions lies partly in the nature of conversion itself, which involves an acknowledgment that the Catholic Church is the Body of Christ, representing him and speaking for him in a way no separated Church can do. This recognition implies a change in one's attitude to the problem of Christian unity, for it means that one has turned away from trying to build a united Church to accepting one that has always existed. Unity in Christ has always been available, but for one reason or another it has not been discovered or has been refused.

An examination of some of the attitudes a man may have taken up on his way to the Church will further reveal the sort of

change that has taken place. The movement towards a fuller knowledge of Christ will have manifested itself in the profession of gradually changing doctrines about his Church and his relationship to it. And once a 'high' or 'catholic' doctrine of the Church has been accepted, a man may do, roughly speaking, one of three things. He may translate his beliefs into practice within the organization of the Church in which he has been brought up, even if other members of that Church do not agree with him, hoping thereby to influence as many as he can; or else he may claim that the convictions to which study of the Bible and of Church history lead him are in fact the true doctrines of the body to which he belongs, going so far as implicitly to 'unchurch' all who do not agree with him or his party; or else he may choose to work for the reconciliation of all Christians by a common pooling of resources or by the widespread acceptance of traditional belief.

Now in none of these cases, among English Christians, even among the 'highest' of 'Anglo-Papalists', will belief in Christ have involved the real acknowledgment of an authority outside the individual conscience which effectually represents him in the contemporary world. This may seem a bold, even, to some Anglo-Catholics, an offensive thing to say. But—to take extreme cases—to believe in the Pope's authority without being in communion with him; to believe in the authority of the English Catholic hierarchy and to say Mass while being in fact 'suspended' by the very bishops for whom one prays; to admire the English Martyrs but not to follow their example; or even simply to believe in One Church without being able to point to it; all of these things reveal not 'bad faith' (would to God that accusation were never made) but incomplete faith. They reveal a certain nearness to conversion to the Church, but something is lacking. The place has not yet been found where inner conviction will meet outward reality. Inner convictions are put into practice, certainly, in work as an Anglo-Catholic, in work for re-union, or in work, quite simply, to bring others to Christ; but the stage has not yet been reached in the individual's spiritual life at which, meeting Christ Incarnate in his Church, the spiritual vision is found to have its counterpart in flesh and blood, when what we have known *must* be true is found to exist in reality, and when we have finally discovered a Church in which faith can be manifested in obedience.

Coming to the Church, therefore, involves something quite

different from simply coming to a place where one's work will be more effective, where previous experience can best be pressed into service; anyone who remains where he is simply because that is where he can be most useful has not yet understood the Church and its claims, and, similarly, anyone who joins the Church because it will make the best use of his talents has not really understood what he should be doing. So many have said, and still say, 'It is my duty to stay here, to work for Christian unity, or to support my Church at a time of difficulty, or to have easier access to other men', and indeed, if that is their conviction, then it is their duty; but let them not imagine that they have yet discovered faith in the Church.

When a man does find that faith, whatever his previous experience, he does not think of being useful to the Church in any particular way. His first concern is to set about acquiring a knowledge of the full Catholic life; and his future work may not be related to the contacts between the Church and separated Christians at all. For many, in fact, previous relations with other churches will represent stages in their personal development which are best left behind in order that further progress may be made; and all converts may be well advised not to preoccupy themselves too much—and not at all, at first—with the ways of belief of other Churches. It is a hindrance in one's Christian life to think too much of the process of one's conversion or of the differences between one's present beliefs and those of others; it represents an itch to 'tinker with the works' which may well delay the acquisition of a better knowledge of the content of the faith or interfere with the simple, single-minded service of our Lord which is the basis of whatever particular work we find to do. However strong his conviction that he is obeying Christ in becoming a Catholic, and can be a perfect disciple in no other way, many a convert allows himself to hanker after one manner or other of doing things with which he used to be familiar, breeding within himself a dissatisfaction with the human ways of the Church and holding up the progress he should be making in becoming familiar with the particular situation of the Church in his time, with the material at its disposal and the problems which face it. Whatever the value of his previous experience, it is of first importance that the convert should not think of himself as an ex-Anglican or an ex-Methodist (or an ex-anything else, Com-

munist included) but as a Catholic, with the ordinary Catholic's duties to God and his neighbours.

One particular facet of this problem appears in England, where a convert may have been held up for years by his desire to be loyal to the Christianity of his own country, which he identifies with Anglicanism. When he becomes a Catholic, in spite perhaps of certain fears about the foreign nature of Catholicism, he may be filled with ideas of bringing all that in Church of England practice is true to Catholic tradition into effective use within the Church; and then, later, impressed with the historic English Catholic tradition, the existence of which had previously been unsuspected, he may turn against the ways of the Church of his former loyalty. But neither of these attitudes is to be recommended, for the first breeds discontent, and the second a false patriotism. We shall not convert England by using Anglican hymns, or by sticking solely to those which the Catholic past provides; it will only be done by writing new ones (and building new churches, and finding new ways of Christian love and service), which people of our own time will want as their own.

So much having been said, the fact remains that the convert has got particular responsibilities, and that these lie for a large part in the field of Christian unity. He will have, and should keep, many friends outside the Church; his very separation from them provides a spur to work for unity, and he and they are channels by which better information may spread, in both directions, about the problems that are involved. Very often he will want to explain himself to the members of the Church from which he has come; but since his joining the Church probably represents the solution of a theological problem which was to some extent a personal one most of his former brethren will listen, if they listen at all, with incomprehension. He must beware of thinking that many others will follow by the same road as he. He must beware, too, of making his thinking and speaking about the Church one long justification of his conversion. But he should certainly be able to present Catholicism in a way which he knows will have some meaning for those whom he has left behind; that will involve the effort of not losing touch with their problems and trying all the time to discern where the blind spot lies which prevents them from seeing that the Church itself is the answer to all their questioning about Christian unity. There is a certain false

spirituality to be found in ecumenical circles which talks about 'bearing the pain of separation' and looks upon joining the Church as an easy way out; the convert is particularly well qualified to provide the corrective, and can point out that since the Unity of the Church has already been won by Christ's Passion, the true participation in his suffering comes when we uproot ourselves to accept his gift, the gift of his Body; to remain in a state of separation is, instead, to inflict pain on him and to avoid accepting it ourselves.

The convert can do a service, also, to his fellow-Catholics by continually reminding them, out of his own experience, that Christians separated from the Church have, nevertheless, a living faith in Christ, and that we should speak to that faith, seeking to build it up, and not thinking continually in terms of the illogicality or the inadequacy of what we conceive to be their belief. Loyalty to Christ in the Church is better expressed in the attempt to discern and to welcome every vestige of Christian faith, wherever it may be found, than in belittling its value in order to confute it more easily or to bolster up our own position.

There may seem little that is positive here, and it may even appear discouraging to anyone approaching the Church or just inside it. But I believe it is the sort of thing which needs to be said to those who are trying to discover an approach to work for Christian unity and who are trying to fit the Catholic Church in somewhere. Such people may even think that they have seen the point about Catholicism, but that it is their duty to work where they are for the time being. A Catholic can only say to such people that they have not yet in reality understood the Church, which will resist all their efforts at comprehension as long as they regard it as one among many Churches needing re-union. As soon as full faith comes, they will kneel before the Church as so many of them kneel before the Blessed Sacrament, and ask our Lord to take them in.

For in work for Christian unity, as in everything else, Christ's great principle applies. 'The man who tries to save his life shall lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake that will secure it' (Matt. 16, 25). The convert must leave all behind; and in the measure to which he does, his previous experience will be available to our Lord to use as he wills. It is because we cling to our human traditions that Christian unity seems so far away, and all

of us, Catholics included, must let past history, which represents our old selves, die if English Christians, and those millions of Englishmen who have no faith, are to find reconciliation in Christ. The convert's principal contribution to Christian unity is made by being converted; his further conversion, revealing the nature of the Church to those who still seek unity, will be the best thing he can offer to the ecumenical cause.



BOSSUET'S LETTER ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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Introductory Note

JACQUES-BÉNIGNE BOSSUET, bishop of Meaux (1681-1704) and the most outstanding French ecclesiastic of his time, is probably best known as an orator and controversialist. But he was also the author of several important spiritual treatises and an experienced director of souls. This letter, here translated into English for the first time, is an early work, written at the age of thirty-two during Pentecost week of 1659. It is the last of a series of four letters written to 'Une demoiselle de Metz' who has since been identified as Alix Clerginet, foundress of a religious house there of the Propagation of the Faith, whose purpose was the conversion of Jews and Protestants. Bossuet, then archdeacon of Metz (to which office he had been appointed at the age of twenty-seven), was the director and co-founder of this house. The letter is remarkable for its elevation of thought, its close dependence on Holy Scripture, and its deep sense of the Mystery of the Church, without any trace of the author's later Gallicanism. The autograph has unfortunately not survived. This translation has been made from the text printed in *La Correspondance de Bossuet* (ed. Urbain et Levesque, Paris 1909, in the series *Les Grands Écrivains de la France*): a few notes have been added and the main divisions indicated, but the numbering of the paragraphs is that of the printed text.